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Hedging

9 Laying the 'Standard' or Midlands hedge

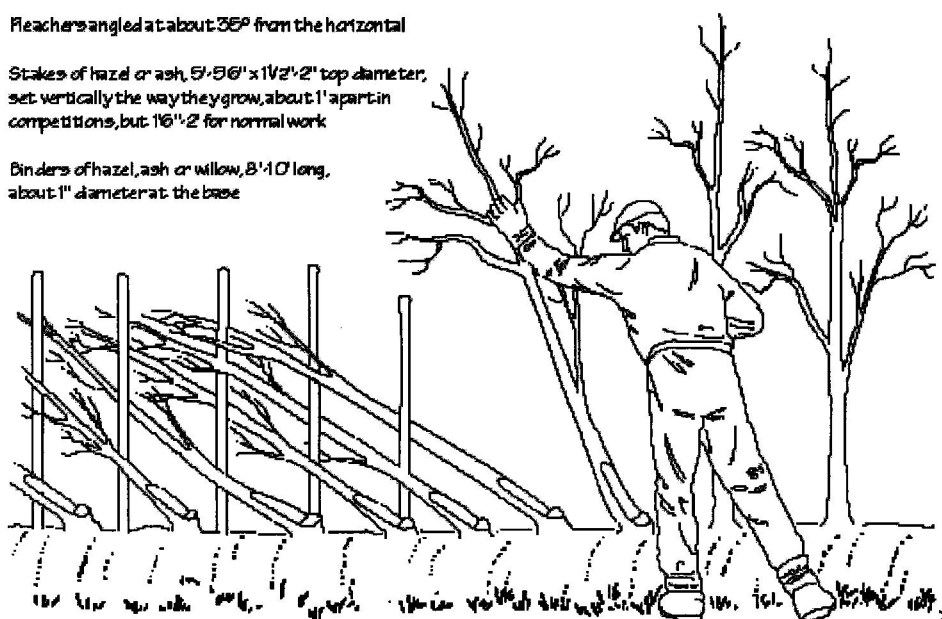
Features of the Midlands hedge

The Midlands hedge is designed primarily as a bullock fence. Typically, it is ditched along one side but lacks a bank, or has only a slight bank formed by periodically mucking the ditch out onto the roots of the shrubs. Ditches, although perhaps at first boundary features associated with banks, later were used mainly for drainage on the frequently heavy soils of this region.

Pleachers angled at about 35° from the horizontal

Stakes of hazel or ash, 5'-5 6" x 1 1/2" x 2" top diameter, set vertically the way they grow, about 1' apart in competitions, but 1 1/2' for normal work

Binders of hazel, ash or willow, 8'-10' long, about 1" diameter at the base

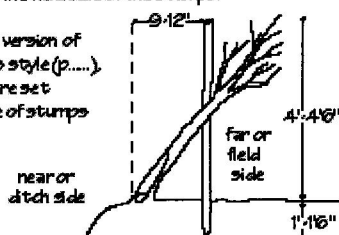


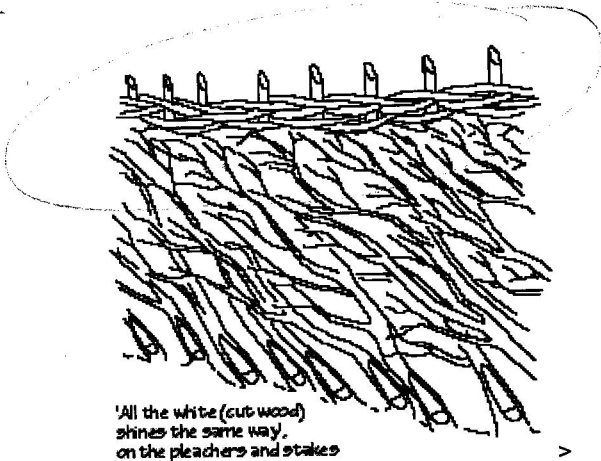
Midlands hedges are asymmetrical in cross-section, with the brushy ends of the pleachers angled out into the field and away from the ditch. Cattle in the field or 'far' side are kept away from the shoots which spring up from the cut stools along the ditch or 'near' side. The brush angled into the field prevents stock from pushing and rubbing on the hedge, and the hedge's height prevents them leaning over. The stakes, with the pleachers woven between, makes the whole hedge sturdy. The binding locks the pleachers down and keeps them from springing out of position. The pleachers should be live; the use of deadwood is frowned upon as it is thought to inhibit new growth, but it may be used if necessary to add strength to a very thin or gappy hedge.

In all Midlands hedging procedures the 'near side' of the hedge is the side with a ditch, and the 'far side' the side next to the field. Where there is no ditch, either side can be chosen to be the near side. Remember though, that it is this side which must be protected from grazing animals.

Hedge width varies with different craftsmen and with the individual hedge. As a general rule, the stakes are set 9'-12" to the field side of the stumps.

In the arable version of the Midlands style (p.), the stakes are set along the line of stumps





'All the white (cut wood)
shines the same way,
on the pleachers and stakes

A well-laid Midlands hedge makes an ideal horse jump, and some Hunts are active supporters of hedging competitions. Hunters prefer the stakes to be sawn off flat so as not to impale the horses.

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Binding

Binding or heathering finishes off the hedge and holds down the pleachers. Unless bound, the pleachers tend to spring out of position and push the tops of the stakes out of line. By the time the binding rots, the hedge has consolidated with new growth and the binding is no longer needed.

Binders are normally of hazel, ash or willow, grown in a close coppice so that they grow tall, thin and straight without any side shoots. They should be no more than 1" (25mm) butt diameter, and at least 8' (2.4m) long. You can use slightly larger or smaller binders according to what is available, but thicker binders may have to be woven in a 2-rod pattern, and thinner ones in a 4-rod pattern, instead of the 3-rod pattern normally used. If the binders supplied look rather thick, you may need to put the stakes further apart than normal, so that you don't have to bend them so much. Choose a thin binder to start (see below). Save any thick binders to use where a stake is loose, to hold it in place.

Sweet chestnut, clematis or bramble can also be used. Don't use wire, as this will cause problems when the hedge is next laid. Binders should be used as fresh as possible, while they are still pliable. If stored under a tarpaulin and kept damp they should remain pliable for up to six weeks if necessary, but freshly cut ones are preferable.

Bind around any trees up to about 4" (100mm) diameter that are in the line of stakes. This will make the binding really strong, and the binding will have rotted away before it causes any problems in restricting the growth of the tree.

Experienced hedgers do their binding so quickly and neatly that the process is hard to follow. The binding is usually said to be 'woven' or 'twisted' around the stakes, but one hedger has described it as 'really more of a tight roll than a twist'. Being smooth and free of knots and kinks, the binders roll tightly together like the strands of a rope. The rolling or twisting action on each binder forces it against the stakes, and makes the whole binding really tight.

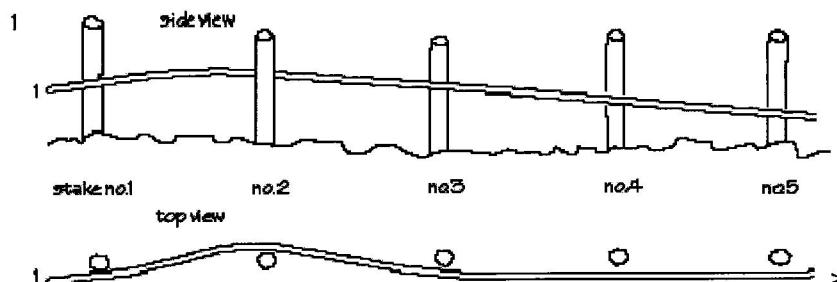
On a training course, it's a good idea to teach the first pair how to bind, who then teach the second pair, and so on. This gives trainees a chance to really learn and understand the process.

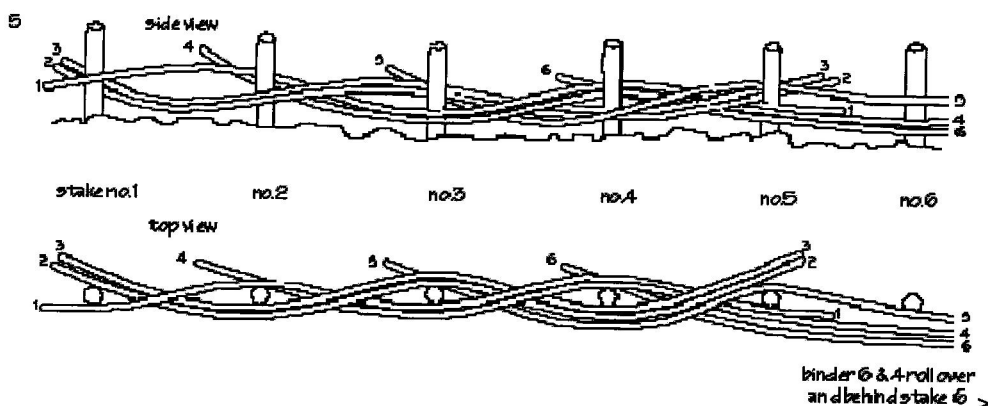
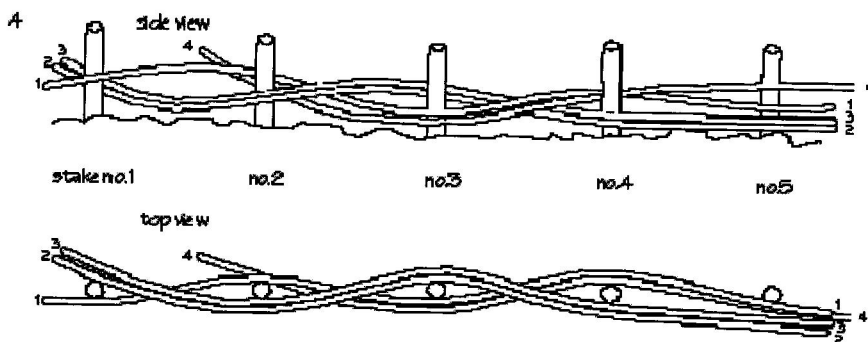
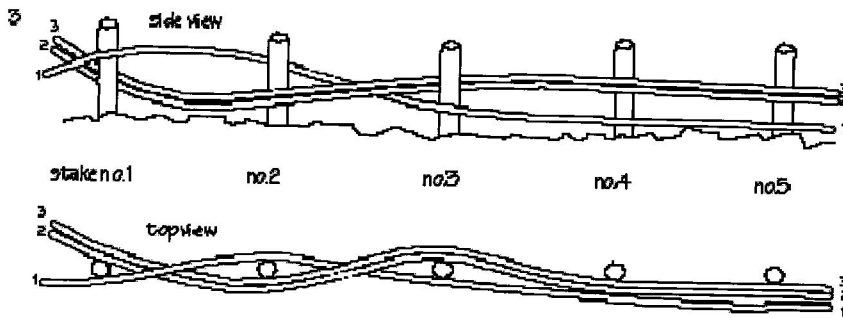
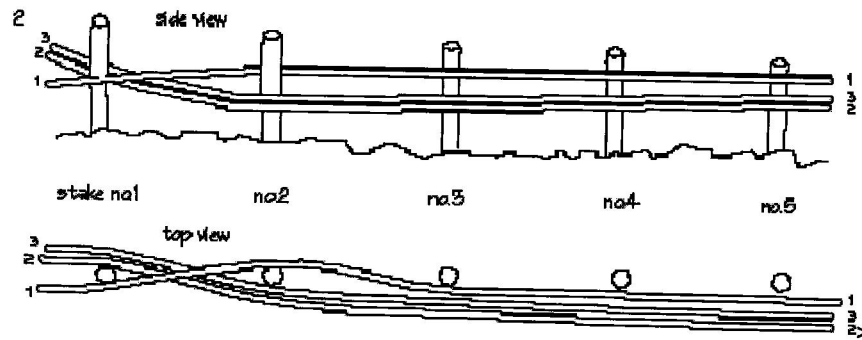
Procedure

Note that in the following diagrams, the binders are shown loosely woven in order to make the pattern clear. In practice, the binders should be woven or rolled as tightly as possible.

If you have been working from left to right, from the near side of the hedge, begin binding at the left. You bind against the lie of the pleachers. Choose a thin binder to start, to minimise the force on the first few stakes.

1. Put the butt end of the first binder in front of the first, behind the second stake, and in front of the third and all subsequent stakes (diagram 1).
2. Insert the butt ends of two binders under the first binder, so that their butts are on the far side of the first stake. They will lie against the near side of the second stake (diagram 2).
3. Roll the second pair over the first binder between stakes two and three, and then pass the second pair behind stake three and in front of stake four and beyond. The first binder stays in front of stake three (diagram 3).





4. Insert the butt end of a fourth binder under the others so that the butt rests against the far side of stake two, and the remainder lies in front of stake three. Roll it and the loose end of the first binder over the other two, so that the fourth and first binders twist over the second and third, and pass behind stake four. The second and third binders will lie in front of stake four, and all of them in front of stakes five and beyond (diagram 4).
5. Insert the butt end of the fifth binder under the others, so that the butt rests against the far side of stake three, and the remainder lies in front of stake four. Roll it over the first and fourth binders, taking the second and third binders with it. At about this point you may come to the ends of the first,

second and third binders, but carry them as far as they go. The fifth binder should pass over the fourth and lie behind stake five, while the fourth binder lies in front of stake five. All are in front of stake six and beyond (diagram 5).

6. Insert the sixth binder under the others so that it rests against the far side of stake four, and comes in front of stake five. Roll it and the fourth binder across the fifth binder and behind stake six. All are in front of stake seven and beyond.
7. Continue in the same way, adding one new binder at each stake.
8. At the end of the row, leave the ends of the last binders hanging to the right of the last stake if you plan to add more stakes later. If you have finished the hedgerow, trim off the ends of the binders a little to the right of the last stake. Now go along the hedge, hammering home all the stakes. If there are any not straight, you can adjust them to either side with the flat side of the billhook, and the binding will hold them in place.
9. Walk back along the hedge, tamping down the binding with the flat blade or the handle of your billhook as you go. Try to make it as level, even and tight as possible, so that it really grips the stakes and holds the hedge down.
10. Trim off any projecting small ends of binders and any side shoots, for neatness.

You can practise the technique of binding by driving nails 1.5" (40mm) apart into a piece of wood to act as stakes, and using drinking straws as binders.

Alternative method

This gives a similar result, but starts with two binders twisted together, to give full thickness to the binding from the point where you start.

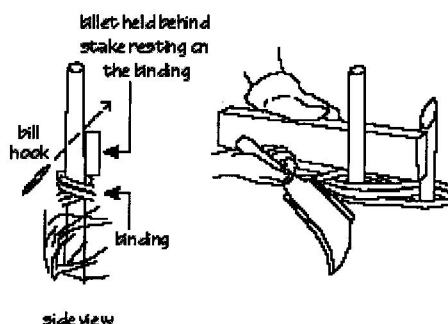
1. Standing, hold a pair of binders at the butt end with your feet, and twist them tightly together from bottom to top.
2. Holding both ends to prevent them unwinding, place binders in front of first stake, behind second stake and in front of third and subsequent stakes.
3. Twist another pair of binders together, and insert under first pair behind first stake, in front of second stake, over first pair of binders, then behind third stake and in front of fourth and subsequent stakes, as in diagram 3 above.
4. Then insert one binder, butt end first, behind second stake, underneath and touching first pair of binders. Twist together with first binders, in a clockwise direction (vice versa if working right to left), take in front of third stake, behind fourth stake and in front of fifth and subsequent stakes, as in diagram 4 above.
5. Continue adding single binders behind each stake in turn, as in step 4.

Trimming the stakes

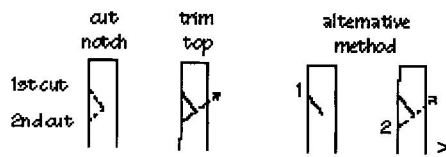
Trim off the stake tops after binding a section of hedge to the height of a 'fist' or hand above the top of the binding. The following procedure describes the Midlands technique, traditionally done with a billhook. Sawing is the easiest and safest method for volunteers not skilled with the billhook. However, the billhook achieves a cleaner and neater finish on the fairly thin stakes used in Midlands hedges. A chain saw will do the job very easily, with no loosening of the stakes.

Procedure

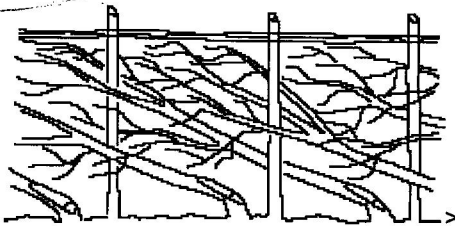
1. Hold a short billet or stout stick behind the stake to be trimmed. Rest the billet on the binding. It may help to angle it from the back of the first stake to the front of the next one in line. The billet supports the stake against the blow and ensures a clean cut.
2. Strike the stake sharply with the billhook. The cut should slope steeply upwards with the grain. Skilled hedgers can usually sever the stake with one blow.



3. If the stake is a bit too thick to cut straight through, hold the billet behind it as before, and chop a notch in the near side of the stake. First chop upwards, then down, to avoid splitting the stake. Then cut the top off as usual, aiming the blow to carry through the bottom face of the notch.



4. Work along the row of stakes, always holding the billhook at the same angle as the angle of the cut surfaces of the pleacher stools. These surfaces face obliquely rather than directly away from the hedge, so that they are more noticeable looking along the hedge one way than the other. The general impression should be that all the cut surfaces, including the stake tops, 'shine the same way'.



Final trimming

This produces a well-finished appearance, and keeps cattle from rubbing against projecting stiff stems.

Use a billhook to cut off spriggy bits sticking out on the near side or top of the hedge. Trim stems near a joint or knot. New side shoots grow from just below the joint nearest the cut tip.

Trim off the thin ends of the binders. Check along the pleacher stumps to make sure that all stubs or 'ears' have been trimmed off clean, and that wood chips or dirt are not obscuring the cuts. In competitions, the hedge may be finished with a neat border, like a garden border, dug along the face side of the stools.

